

LETTING GO
Genesis 12:1-4
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10
Mark 1:16-20
September 18, 1983

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"For everything there is a season," the ancient preacher announced.

"...a time to - cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.
...a time to - embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing,
...a time to - seek, and a time to lose;
...a time to keep, and a time to cast away."

There is a time, to paraphrase all of these poetic images, for holding tightly, and a time for letting go. How often we have heard that passage from Ecclesiastes, and appreciated its literary symmetry, but not understood deeply what it is describing. And then, suddenly, life calls us to the task of letting go of something, releasing our grip, and we find that it is not so easy. And just as suddenly we see that life is an exercise in this discipline, this necessity of letting go, and just as suddenly we know that the passage is in the Bible, not because it's good poetry, but because it addresses the human situation at its most poignant, most needy, and most creative.

Think what a major theme it is in the Bible. Think of all the people whose faith experience involved letting go of something valuable, something precious.

→ Adam and Eve, for instance, taking charge of their lives, making a decision which turns out badly, and which results in their having to let go of the secure paradise of Eden.

Jonah - letting go of the security of home to go, reluctantly, to Ninevah; Elijah, forced to let go of the warm, womb-like safety of the cave, to go back to the terrors and perplexities of life; Jeremiah, letting go of normality, sanity, to be God's prophet; Jesus...who, one has to assume, could have elected to spend his life working in the family shop in Nazareth, and who had to let go of that.

3/18 The Bible is full of it. Jazz vocalist, Roberta Flack, had a hit awhile ago, "Let Pharaoh Go." And Ernest Campbell, former minister at Riverside Church, observes, "What a switch! We thought the action at the Exodus had to do with God getting Pharaoh to let the Jews go. But that was nothing...It didn't require much from God. A few dirty tricks and a little magic, and they were sprung. But what a time God had out there in the wilderness. The Hebrews couldn't let Pharaoh go. Some of them said, 'There's not even a McDonald's out here.' Others grumbled, 'Can't even use our VISA cards.'" (Ernest Campbell, in A.D. Magazine)

There is a distinct dialectic in the Bible between our natural inclination which is to hold on, to grasp tightly - and the call of God, which sounds always like a summons to let go of something, to loosen our grip.

In fact, sometimes it sounds like letting go is nearly synonymous with faith. The prototypical couple in the Bible is Abram and Sarah. Faith for them is a matter, not of their believing a lot of ideas about God, but their willingness to let go and

Jesus went to Jerusalem because he loved his nation. He went because there was no way for him to express that love honestly, and not go.

The issues are far from resolved. The venerable idiom, "religion and politics don't mix," is mouthed universally, with a straight face, by people who should and do know better. I have discovered that what the phrase means ordinarily is..."I don't appreciate the criticism religion is presuming to make of my particular politics. Religious support for my positions, on the other hand, and criticism of the other side is always welcome.

Pope John Paul's visit to Poland recently is most instructive. Free men and women the world over were inspired by what he did and said. Who will ever forget the picture of the Pope, in white Robe, listening with intense strength, to the military head of the government trying to rationalize martial law and the absence of basic human rights in his land? After I mentioned it last week, someone was kind enough to refer me to James Russell Lowell's magnificent poem The Present Crisis.

"When a deed is done for freedom, through the broad earth's aching breast
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from East to West
And the slave, wher'er he cowers, feels the soul within him climb
To the awful verge of manhood, as the energy sublime
Of a century bursts full-blossomed on the thorny stems of time."

John Paul II acted and spoke out of that strong Judeo Christian tradition: a prophet whose face was set to go to the city. How easy it is to be inspired by that when it is someone else's city, someone else's system. Already Vatican officials are leaking suggestions to the press that after all he is Polish and he may have overdone it a bit. And in this country, while the Pope is applauded for confronting totalitarianism of the left, his Bishops are roundly condemned for confronting totalitarianism of the right in Central and South America. And the American Bishops, setting their collective face to confront the matter of nuclear terror as the keystones of American foreign policy, are told - of all things - to stop meddling in politics.

I propose that the highest and best of our religion calls us - not to retreat from the world with all its political ambiguity and complexity, but to involvement in the world as responsible citizens. I propose Jesus, setting his face to go to Jerusalem as model for his latter day followers. I propose the love of Jesus for people and nation as foundation. We are called to love our nation, I believe. The hard-hats were right in the sixties, at least their instincts were right, with the belligerent slogan: "America - Love It or Leave It." What was missing from much of the Vietnam protest, they sensed, was love of nation, loyalty to nation, passionate affection for everything they held dear. They were wrong, of course, in equating all protest, all objection, with disloyalty. "Love It Right or Leave It" they should have said: love it thoughtfully, loyally, critically, intelligently, and passionately.

"We can't leave patriotism to the demagogues," Professor Walter Wink said recently, and Martin Marty saw things clearly when he lamented that the trouble with our country is "the committed aren't civil, and the civil aren't committed."

I propose that our religion calls us to civil commitment to the body politic, to an involved, informed and thoughtful love for our nation. It can be, urged altruistically as simple civic responsibility. Time Magazine, in the regular "Presidency" feature quoted Plato..."He who refuses to rule is liable to be ruled by one who is worse than himself." And better still, James Madison's sharp observation in 1788..."As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires...circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in which justify...esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form."

It is the Adam and Eve story, retold in every life. That primal paradise represents the security each of us wants and needs so badly we would never leave it if we could avoid the break. But part of the profound subtlety of that story is that while Eden may be paradise, full human life only becomes possible once we pass through the gates and get outside.

Letting go of the security of childhood is essential to our growth as adults. Intellectual growth, as well, requires us to let go of the security of fixed certainties. There is a sense in which the intellectual history of our civilization is the story of genius battering down the fixed certainties of the prior generation. It was not easy to persuade people to take seriously the suggestion that the earth is round; or that the sun, not the earth, is at the center of the solar system; or that blood from one person may be transfused into another. It has not been easy to convince people that the process of creation is evolving, in spite of overwhelming evidence. To grow intellectually is to be open to new truth and consequently to let go of the fixed certainties of the past.

There is a powerful scenario in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men in which a physically large, gentle, and mentally handicapped man by the name of Lenny practically squeezes the life out of a rabbit in the process of expressing affection. You may recall that the same horrible thing happens later, when Lenny tries to love a woman. Steinbeck knew a fundamental human truth, namely that in order to love you have to let go: that love which grasps, holds tightly, restricts, does not give life at all. There is a sense in which you have to let go of something in order truly to appreciate it. Human sin is never more eloquent or powerful than in the demonic control the things we are squeezing exercise over us. And there is a sense in which you have to let go of someone in order truly to love. It is not easy. We would rather control than love. Our own insecurity, our sense of mortality drives us to hold too tightly. "You must lose your life if you want to find it," Jesus taught. You must loosen your controlling grip on children, wife, husband, parents - if you love them. You must let go of what you own if you wish to enjoy owning it - or to avoid being owned by it.

Jesus began his ministry by summoning a few individuals to let go of their fishing nets. Part of what Jesus did throughout Galilee was to call men and women away from an old and comfortable way of seeing things, a religious system that was as precious as life itself to them. Part of what Jesus did was to invite people to leave old securities behind and to discover a whole new foundation for security - in following him.

So, in our day, we have experienced that summons. ^{God} He has called us to examine and leave behind fixed certainties about race. It came about when the accumulated injustice of two centuries of human slavery, oppression, discrimination was gathered into a major force for change. But it also came about, I believe, because the same Christ who asked Simon and Andrew to drop their nets - called his people to examine, discard, and grow away from the racial stereotypes which were the fixed certainty of the past. So, we have been called in our day to examine fixed certainties about the role of women and many of us are astounded to see now the silliness of those certainties which we thought served us well. And so, it seems to me, you and I can expect Jesus Christ to continue to call and push and prod and summon - to continue to examine all the certainties and to be willing to follow where he, not they, lead.

Solzhenitsyn warns that the only hope for Western civilization is a profound change of heart. That is a religious matter of the first order. Political scientists know that republics last only so long as their citizens love them. May I suggest three ways to love our nation.

First, an emotional commitment. Fly a flag on occasion. Care enough to invest emotionally. Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca told the graduating class at the University of Michigan recently, "The only thing we seem to be missing is the determination...I want you to get mad about the current state of affairs. I want you to get so mad you kick your elders in their figurative posteriors and move America off dead center. Our nation was born when 56 patriots got mad enough to sign the Declaration of Independence...Getting mad in a constructive way is good for the soul - and the country." (Time, June 13, 1983)

Second, an intellectual commitment. Learn the truth. Read, read, read, not just the journals and papers that tell it the way you like hearing it, but particularly those which tell it the other way. Read the Call and Post, as well as the Dispatch; Newsweek as well as U.S. News and World Report. Read hard enough to satisfy yourself that you have some manageable concept of what is actually happening. Read hard enough to learn what you don't want to know: that poor children die at a rate three times that of not poor in this country; that forty percent of the poor black urban children in this country between five and nine are not immunized; that nine billion dollars was cut out of federal programs for disease prevention and lifeline support for poor families last year by Congress and the administration. (see New Yorker, p. 26, June 27, 1983)

Third - commit your will, your intention. Set your face and do something.

The COMPASS program of this church is trying to stand with the poor. COMPASS needs help. Why not invest the money the Congress gave us last Wednesday in the commonwealth? Invest that money in the human family. Better yet, volunteer: come down and help a few hours a week. Or write letters, or call congressmen, or contribute to your party.

The decision to go to Jerusalem was the most critical choice Jesus ever made. It cost him his life. It showed us how human life was meant to be lived. It demonstrated that profound Christian truth, that in losing life you find it: that in investing self in the common good, you realize more fully your own personhood.

Jesus the Christ came to Jerusalem and forever defined the locus of the Gospel as the fulcrum of life: yours and mine too. In Christ - God loves us where we are: in Christ, God bids us follow. Amen.